

BURNING DAYLIGHT

By JACK LONDON

CHAPTER XXXIX. (Continued.)

ON the other hand, chafing dish suppers in the big living room for their camping guests were a common happening, at which times Daylight allotted them their chores and saw that they were performed. For one who stopped only for the night it was different. Likewise it was different with her brother, back from Germany and again able to sit a horse. On his vacations he became the third in the family, and to him were given the building of the fires, the sweeping and the washing of the dishes.

Daylight devoted himself to the lightening of Dede's labors, and it was her brother who incited him to utilize the splendid water power of the ranch that was running to waste. It required Daylight's breaking of extra horses to pay for the materials, and the brother devoted a three weeks' vacation to assisting, and together they installed a Pelton wheel. Besides sawing wood and turning his lathe and grindstone, Daylight connected the power with the churn, but his great triumph was when he put his arm around Dede's waist and led her out to inspect a washing machine, run by the Pelton wheel, which really worked and really washed clothes.

Dede and Ferguson between them, after a patient struggle, taught Daylight poetry, so that in the end he might have been often seen sitting slack in the saddle and dropping down the mountain trails through the sun-flecked woods chanting aloud Kipling's "Tomlinson," or, when sharpening his axe, singing into the whirling grindstone Henley's "Song of the Sword." Not that he ever became consummately literary in the way his two teachers were. Beyond "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Caliban and Setebos" he found nothing in Browning, while George Meredith was ever his despair. It was of his own initiative, however, that he invested in a violin and practised so assiduously that in time he and Dede beguiled many a happy hour playing together after night had fallen.

So all went well with this well-mated pair. Time never dragged. There were always new wonderful mornings and still cool twilights at the end of day; and ever a thousand interests claimed him, and his interests were shared by her. More thoroughly than he knew had he come to a comprehension of the relativity of things. In this new game he played he found in little things all the intensities of gratification and desire that he had found in the frenzied big things when he was a power and rocked half a continent with the fury of the blows he struck. With head and hand, at risk of life and limb, to bit and break a wild colt and win it to the service of man was to him no less great an achievement. And this new table on which he played the game was clean. Neither lying nor cheating nor hypocrisy was here. The other game had made for decay and death, while this new one made for clean strength and life. And so he was content, with Dede at his side, to watch the procession of the days and seasons from the farmhouse perched on the canyon lip; to ride through crisp, frosty mornings or under burning summer suns, and to shelter in the big room where blazed the logs in the fireplace he had built, while outside the world shuddered and struggled in the storm clasp of a south-easter.

Once only Dede asked him if he ever regretted, and his answer was to crush her in his arms and smother her lips with his. His answer a minute later took speech.

"Little woman, even if you did cost thirty millions, you are sure the cheapest necessity of life I ever indulged in." And then he added:—"Yes, I do have one regret, and a monstrous big one, too. I'd sure like to have the winning of you all over again. I'd like to go sneaking around the Piedmont hills looking for you. I'd like to meander into those rooms of yours at Berkeley for the first time. And, there's no use talking. I'm plumb soaking with regret that I can't put my arms around you again that time you leaned your head on my breast and cried in the wind and rain."

CHAPTER XL.

BUT there came the day, one year, in early April, when Dede sat in an easy chair on the porch, sewing on certain small garments, while Daylight read aloud to her. It was in the afternoon and a bright sun was shining down on a world of new green. Along the irrigation channels of the vegetable garden streams of water were flowing, and now and again Daylight broke off from his reading to run out and change the flow of water. Also he was teasingly interested in the certain small garments on which Dede worked, while she was radiantly happy over them, though at times, when his tender fun was too insistent, she was roily confused or affectionately resentful.

From where they sat they could look out over the world. Like the curve of a scimitar blade the Valley of the Moon stretched before them, dotted with farmhouses and varied by pasture lands, hay fields and vineyards. Beyond rose the wall of the valley, every crease and wrinkle of which Dede and Daylight knew, and at one place, where the sun struck squarely, the white dump of the abandoned mine burned like a jewel. In the foreground, in the paddock by the barn, was Mab, full of pretty anxieties for the early spring foal that staggered about her on tottery legs. The air shimmered with heat, and altogether it was a lazy, basking day. Quail whistled to their young from the thickened hillside behind the house. There was a gentle cooling of pigeons and from the green depths of the big canyon arose the sobbing wood note of a mourning dove. Once there was a warning chorus from the foraging hens and a wild rush for cover as a hawk, high in the blue, cast its drifting shadow along the ground.

It was this, perhaps, that aroused old hunting memories in Wolf. At any rate, Dede and Daylight became aware of excitement in the paddock, and saw harmlessly re-enacted a grim old tragedy of the Younger World. Curiously eager, velvet footed and silent as a ghost, sliding and gliding and crouching, the dog that was a mere domesticated wolf stalked the enticing bit of young life that Mab had brought so recently into the world. And the mare, her own ancient instincts aroused and quivering, circled ever between the foal and this menace of the wild young days when all her ancestry had known fear of him and his hunting brethren. Once she whirled and tried to kick him, but usually she strove to strike him with her forehoofs, or rushed upon him with open mouth and ears laid back in an effort to crunch his backbone between her teeth. And the wolf-dog, with eyes narrowed down and crouching, would slide sulkily away, only to circle up to the foal from the other



"Here, Chick, Chick, Chick, Chick, Chick! Here, Chick, Chick, Chick!"

side and give chase to the mare for new alarm. Then Daylight, urged on by Dede's solicitude, uttered a low, threatening cry, and Wolf, drooping and sagging in all the body of him in token of his instant return to man's allegiance, slunk off behind the barn.

It was a few minutes later that Daylight, breaking off from his reading to change the streams of irrigation, found that the water had ceased flowing. He shouldered a pick and shovel, took a hammer and a pipe wrench, from the tool house, and returned to Dede on the porch.

"I reckon I'll have to go down and dig the pipe out," he told her. "It's that slide that's threatened all winter. I guess she's come down at last."

"Don't you read ahead, now," he warned as he passed around the house and took the trail that led down the wall of the canyon.

Half way down the trail he came upon the slide. It was a small affair, only a few tons of earth and crumbling rock, but, starting from fifty feet above, it had struck the water pipe with force sufficient to break it at a connection. Before proceeding to work he glanced up the path of the slide, and he glanced with the eye of the earth-trained miner. And he saw what made his eyes startle and cease for the moment from questing further.

"Hello," he murmured aloud; "look who's here!"

His glance moved on up the steep broken surface and across it from side to side. Here and there in places small twisted manzanitas were rooted precariously, but in the main, save for weeds and grass, that portion of the cañon was bare. There were signs of a surface that had shifted often as the rains poured a flow of rich eroded soil from above over the lip of the cañon.

"A true fissure vein, or I never saw one," he proclaimed softly.

And as the old hunting instincts had aroused that day in the wolf-dog, so in him recrudescenced all the old hot desires of gold hunting. Dropping the hammer and pipe wrench, but retaining pick and shovel, he climbed up the slide to where a vague line of out-jutting, but mostly soil covered, rock could be seen. It was all but indiscernible, but his quick practised eye had sketched the hidden formation which it signified. Here and there along this wall of the vein he attacked the crumbling rock with the pick and shovelled the encumbering soil away. Several times he examined this rock. So soft was some of it that he could break it in his fingers. Shifting a dozen feet higher up, he again attacked with pick and shovel.

And this time, when he rubbed the soil from a chunk of rock and looked he straightened up suddenly, gasping with delight. And then, like a deer at a drinking pool in fear of its enemies, he flung a quick glance around to see if any eye were gazing upon him. He grinned at his own foolishness and returned to his examination of the chunk. A slant of sunlight fell on it and it was all a-glitter with tiny specks of unmistakable free gold.

"From the grass roots down," he muttered in an awe-stricken voice, as he swung his pick into the yielding surface.

He seemed to undergo a transformation. No quart of cocktails had ever put such a flame in his cheeks or such a fire in his eyes. As he worked he was caught up in the old passion that had ruled most of his life. A frenzy seized him that markedly increased from moment to moment. He worked like a madman

till he panted from his exertions and the sweat dripped from his face to the ground. He quested across the face of the slide to the opposite wall of the vein and back again. And, midway, he dug down through the red volcanic earth that had washed from the disintegrating hill above until he uncovered quartz, rotten quartz, that broke and crumbled in his hands and showed to be alive with free gold.

Sometimes he started small slides of earth that covered up his work and compelled him to dig again. Once he was swept fifty feet down the canyon side, but he floundered and scrambled up again without pausing for breath. He hit upon quartz that was so rotten that it was almost like clay, and here the gold was richer than ever. It was a veritable treasure chamber. For a hundred feet up and down he traced the walls of the vein. He even climbed over the canyon lip to look along the brow of the hill for signs of the outcrop. But that could wait, and he hurried back to his find.

He toiled on in the same mad haste, until exhaustion and an intolerable ache in his back compelled him to pause. He straightened up with even a richer piece of gold laden quartz. Stooping, the sweat from his forehead had fallen to the ground. It now ran into his eyes, blinding him. He wiped it from him with the back of his hand and returned to a scrutiny of the gold. It would run thirty thousand to the ton, fifty thousand, anything—he knew that. And as he gazed upon the yellow lure and panted for air, and wiped the sweat away, his quick vision leaped and set to work. He saw the spur track that must run up from the valley and across the upland pastures, and he ran the grades and built the bridge that would

span the canyon, until it was real before his eyes. Across the canyon was the place for the mill, and there he erected it, and he erected also the endless chain of buckets, suspended from a cable and operated by gravity, that would carry the ore across the canyon to the quartz crusher. Likewise, the whole mine grew before him and beneath him—tunnels, shafts and galleries and hoisting plants. The blasts of the miners were in his ears and from across the canyon he could hear the roar of the stamps. The hand that held the lump of quartz was trembling and there was a tired, nervous palpitation apparently in the pit of his stomach. It came to him abruptly that what he wanted was a drink—whiskey, cocktails, anything, a drink. And even then, with this new hot yearning for alcohol upon him, he heard, faint and far, drifting down the green abyss of the canyon, Dede's voice, crying:—

"Here, chick, chick, chick, chick, chick! Here, chick, chick, chick!"

He was astounded at the lapse of time. She had left her sewing on the porch and was feeding the chickens preparatory to getting supper. The afternoon was gone. He could not conceive that he had been away that long.

Again came the call:—"Here, chick, chick, chick, chick, chick! Here, chick, chick, chick!"

It was the way she always called—first five, and then three. He had long since noticed it. And from these thoughts of her arose other thoughts that caused a great fear slowly to grow in his face. For it seemed to him that he had almost lost her. Not once had he thought of her in those frenzied hours, and for that much, at least, had she truly been lost to him.

He dropped the piece of quartz, slid down the slide, and started up the trail, running heavily. At the edge of the clearing he eased down and almost crept to a point of vantage, whence he could peer out, himself unseen. She was feeding the chickens, tossing to them handfuls of grain and laughing at their antics.

The sight of her seemed to relieve the panic fear into which he had been flung, and he turned and ran back down the trail. Again he climbed the slide, but this time he climbed higher, carrying the pick and shovel with him. And again he toiled frenziedly, but this time with a different purpose. He worked artfully, losing slide after slide of the red soil and sending it streaming down and covered up all he had uncovered, hiding from the light of day the treasure he had discovered. He even went into the woods and scooped armfuls of last year's fallen leaves, which he scattered over the slide. But this he gave up as a vain task, and he sent more slides of soil down upon the scene of his labor until no sign remained of the outjutting walls of the vein.

Next he repaired the broken pipe, gathered his tools together and started up the trail. He walked slowly, feeling a great weariness, as of a man who had passed through a frightful crisis. He put the tools away, took a great drink of water that again flowed through the pipes, and sat down on the bench by the open kitchen door. Dede was inside, preparing supper, and the sound of her footsteps gave him a vast content.

He breathed the balmy mountain air in great gulps, like a diver fresh risen from the sea. And, as he drank in the air, he gazed with all his eyes at the clouds and sky and valley, as if he were drinking in that, too, along with the air.

Dede did not know he had come back, and at times he turned his head and stole glances in at her—at her efficient hands, at the bronze of her brown hair that smouldered with fire when she crossed the path of sunshine that streamed through the window, at the promise of her figure that shot through him a pang most strangely sweet and sweetly dear. He heard her approaching the door, and kept his head resolutely toward the valley. And next, he thrilled, as he had always thrilled, when he felt the caressing gentleness of her fingers through his hair.

"I didn't know you were back," she said. "Was it serious?"

"Pretty bad, that slide," he answered, still gazing away and thrilling to her touch. "More serious than I reckoned. But I've got the plan. Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to plant eucalyptus all over it. They'll hold it out. I'll plant them thick as grass, so that even a hungry rabbit can't squeeze between them, and when they get their roots a-going nothing in creation will ever move that dirt again."

"Why, is it as bad as that?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing exciting. But I'd sure like to see any blamed old slide get the best of me, that's all. I'm going to seal that slide down so that it'll stay there for a million years. And when the last trump sounds and Sonoma Mountain and all the other mountains pass into nothingness that old slide will be still a-standing there, held up by the roots."

He passed his arm around her and pulled her down on his knees.

"Say, little woman, you sure miss a lot by living here on the ranch—music and theatres, and such things. Don't you ever have a hankering to drop it all and go back?"

So great was his anxiety that he dared not look at her, and when she laughed and shook her head he was aware of a great relief. Also, he noted the undiminished youth that rang through that same old-time boyish laugh of hers.

"Say," he said, with sudden fierceness, "don't you go fooling around that slide until after I get the trees in and rooted. It's mighty dangerous and I sure can't afford to lose you now."

He drew her lips to his and kissed her hungrily and passionately.

"What a lover!" she said; and pride in him and in her own womanhood was in her voice.

"Look at that, Dede." He removed one encircling arm and swept it in a wide gesture over the valley and the mountains beyond. "The Valley of the Moon—a good name, a good name. Do you know, when I look out over it all, and think of you and of all it means, it kind of makes me ache in the throat, and I have things in my heart I can't find the words to say, and I have a feeling that I can almost understand Browning and those other high flying poet fellows. Look at Hood Mountain there, just where the sun's striking. It was down in that crease that we found the spring."

"And that was the night you didn't milk the cows till ten o'clock," she laughed. "And if you keep me here much longer, supper won't be any earlier than it was that night."

Both arose from the bench, and Daylight caught up the milk pail from the nail by the door. He paused a moment longer to look out over the valley.

"It's sure grand," he said.

"It's sure grand," she echoed, laughing joyously at him, and with him and herself and all the world as she passed in through the door.

And Daylight, like the old man he once had been, himself went down the hill through the trees of one set with a milk pail on his arm.

THE END